For and *Against* Cartesianism:
Peter Ochs on the Purpose of Philosophy

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The most valuable aspect of Peter Ochs's work for my own life and thinking concerns his reflections—and, sometimes, top-down proclamations—on academic philosophy and what role the philosopher plays within the modern academy. Most of these reflections are found in his magnum opus entitled *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (*PPLS*).[1] In addition to his most important book, we find another proclamation about academic philosophy and the role of the philosopher in an earlier essays (1993),[2] as well as a chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (2001).[3] After 2001,[4] Ochs tends to focus more on the academic discipline of Religious Studies—rather than philosophy—so my engagement with and interpretation of Ochs's thinking involves this very specific period of his publications: 1992 – 2001.[5]

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[1] Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998); hereafter cited as *PPLS*.

[2] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," in *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, ed. David Ray Griffin, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 43-87.

[3] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today: Under the Sign of Three," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publications, 2001), 324-348.

[4] Exceptions are instances in *Another Reformation* (2011) where Ochs encourages philosophers to help Christian theologians avoid fallacies that lead to or result in Christian supersessionism.

[5] I completed writing this chapter way in advance of Ochs's newest book, *Religion without Violence: The Philosophy and Practice of Scriptural Reasoning* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2019)—which, I imagine, has further clues and guidance on the purpose of philosophy and the role of philosophers in the modern academy.

This chapter sets its course with the very modest goal of offering a genealogy of Peter Ochs's thinking concerning the purpose of philosophy and the role of the philosopher within the modern academy.

The genealogical findings of this chapter, perhaps surprisingly, involves a real struggle with the philosophical methods and positions of Rene Descartes—methods and positions that often get reduced to the philosophical label of Cartesianism. For Ochs, however, the matter is not so straightforward. In what follows, readers will find a back-and-forth—in terms of affirming and negating Descartes's philosophy, known as Cartesianism—by Ochs as he gives clues and guidance concerning the purpose of philosophy and the role of the philosopher in the modern academy.

[A]Ochs on Ordinary Life, Postmodern Playfulness, and the Problem of Nominalism (1993)

Ochs contributes to a fascinating volume on postmodern philosophy containing individual chapters on Henri Bergson, William James, Charles Hartshorne, Charles Peirce, and Alfred North Whitehead. Each contributor is tasked with writing a chapter on a singular philosopher—philosophers who seemingly are "modern"—yet these authors make the case that each philosopher offers a "constructive postmodernism." Usually, postmodernism requires a wholesale rejection of Cartesianism; what we learn from Ochs, however, is that postmodernism might be better be thought of as an open and real struggle with Descartes and Cartesianism.

In his chapter on Peirce, Ochs makes three claims about what Peirce's postmodern *method* looks like and how it serves as a model for philosophers today: (1) receiving the "gifts" offered to us found in everyday experiences and within ordinary life;

(2) repairing problems that arise within ordinary life; and (3) relying musement—the "free play" of the imagination—to help with problems in ordinary life. Additionally, Ochs offers several assertions concerning a philosophical *position* that philosophers should break the habit of defending and holding: nominalism.

Peirce can be considered "postmodern" because he offers a method for philosophical thinking that critiques and repairs methods found within modern philosophy. I outline this on the terms of the purpose of philosophy, according to Ochs's and Peirce's postmodernism. First, against the modern tendency to wage "war with the everyday," Peirce invites philosophers to consider the "gifts to be offered in the service of everyday life and everyday community."[6] Peirce makes the purpose of philosophy a consideration and exploration of everyday experiences and ordinary life.

Does Peirce idealize the ordinary? Ochs negates this question: "Without idealizing the everyday and without calling for any atavistic return to 'a time when', he [Peirce] was a critic of the modern intellectual rather than of ordinary life."[7] Making ordinary life part of the purpose of philosophy, for Peirce, entails neither an idealization nor Romanticizing of ordinary life, but a critique and repair on the binary between intellectualism and the ordinary defended and developed within modern philosophy.[8]

Second, what does it mean to make ordinary life part of the purpose of philosophy? According to Ochs, Peirce turns "the business of philosophy" into an enterprise "to solve the problems that arise in everyday experience."[9] Ochs claims that

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[6] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 46.

[7] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 46-47.

[8] For my own reflections on the strong connections between intellectualism and ordinary life, see *Strength of Mind*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2018).

this leads Peirce to the phenomenological tradition, within what we now call Continental philosophy, because "phenomenology sketches out the elemental qualities of everyday experiences."[10] Focusing on everyday experiences means that the purpose of philosophy becomes solving problems within ordinary life.

Third, what is it about philosophy that makes it capable of solving problems within ordinary life? Ochs claims that what underlies Peirce's phenomenology is the category of musement, and musement makes philosophy helpful for and within ordinary life. Defining musement as the "free play" of the imagination, Ochs writes:

> **[EXT]**Given free play, the imagination gives uninhibited expression to the fundamental categories of expression…in the contemplation of which inquirers may construct norms for reforming our habits of action [within ordinary life]…. [Philosophy has] practical import…because it offers possibilities that might really be enacted within our contexts of action: possibilities of real habit-change, enabling us to comprehend the world as it now displays itself [rather than how modern philosophers think it *ought* to be displayed]. For Peirce, philosophy itself is the prototypical activity of constructively re-imagining the fundamental norms of action.[11]**[/EXT]**

According to Ochs, Peirce strikes a balance between allowing everyday experiences to determine our thinking—instead of the modern tendency to over-intellectualize experience—and encouraging the "free play" of the imagination to address and solve problems found within ordinary life. This balance seems hard to accomplish because the move to the imagination might result in the same kind of intellectualizing that Peirce seeks philosophy to avoid. Peirce thinks that if philosophers remain grounded in everyday experience and in ordinary life, however, then such a temptation will be avoided. Because it begins with ordinary life, Peirce's philosophy can be considered a

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[9] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 65-66.

[10] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 66.

[11] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 72.

correction or repair of modernity; because it encourages musement, Peirce's philosophy can be understood as a constructive version of postmodern playfulness.

In the opening sentence of this chapter, I suggested that Ochs sometimes makes top-down proclamations about academic philosophy. The clearest instance of this comes in this essay on Peirce's postmodernism. Throughout his essay, Ochs claims that philosophers should neither assume nor defend the modern position of nominalism. What are the problems of nominalism? In its rationalist manifestation, nominalism leads to an over-reliance of individual intuitions—which leads, at its worst, to tenacity and, at its best, to *a priorism* unaccountable to other human thinkers.[12] Within philosophy, this version of nominalism has become synonymous with Cartesianism. In its empiricist manifestation, nominalism makes us think that individual sensations give us actual and reliable knowledge. Ochs says, "Peirce's critique of nominalism means that we do not *know* what we encounter merely by sensing it."[13] As a discipline, philosophy needs to move on from nominalism.

[A]Ochs's Appeal to American Pragmatists (1998)

Peter Ochs's scholarship focuses on the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and his research on Peirce's writings culminated in the scholarly book entitled *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*.[14] In *PPLS*, Ochs argues that Peirce's

[12] See Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html

[13] Ochs, "Charles Sanders Peirce," 70.

[14] I have written much more (than I do here) on arguments found within Ochs's *PPLS*; see Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues*, chapter 5; *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 35-38 & 129-131; "'Ye Shall Know Them By Their Fruits'," in *American Philosophers Read Scripture*, chapter 6; and *An Introduction to Scriptural Reasoning*, (forthcoming with Cascade Press).

technical work in logic and the philosophy of science marks a return to Scripture (Old and New Testaments) within modern philosophy. Rene Descartes set modern philosophy on a course where Scripture became neglected as a source for genuine knowledge and, instead, we ought to trust either our own individual intuitions (Cartesianism) or individual sense impressions (empiricism). Peirce diagnosis the link between problematic features of modern philosophies and their neglect of Scripture. In order to correct Cartesianism and other problems within modern philosophy, Ochs argues that Peirce returns to Scripture as a source for different forms of knowledge.

Because of *PPLS*, Ochs is not popular among other Peirce scholars. Peirce scholars tend to downplay the religious and theological aspects of Peirce's work, and Ochs forces his readers to recognize how Scripture plays a necessary role within Peirce's philosophy.[15] To neglect the role of Scripture within Peirce's logic and philosophy of science is to perpetuate the problems within modern philosophy that Peirce, himself, addressed and oftentimes repaired and resolved. Ochs rejects the forms of Cartesianism, within academic philosophy, that still make us think we should trust our individual intuitions over the logic and wisdom of Scripture.

In *PPLS*, Ochs writes to professional philosophers: "The philosopher's own suffering cannot…become the subject of philosophic concern."[16] What philosophers perceive as their own suffering, and the remedy/remedies for that suffering, cannot set norms for philosophical investigations. Suffering caused by problems within received traditions ought to be "the subject of philosophic concern." In *PPLS*, therefore, Ochs

[15] For further development of this claim, see my "Introduction" in *American Philosophers Read Scripture*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019),

[16] Ochs, *PPLS*, 297.

reads Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief" more on the terms of fixing or repairing suffering than on the terms of establishing beliefs or convictions.[17] For Ochs, the role of the philopher involves helping readers and students fix or repair the problematic aspects of their received traditions—especially those problematic aspects that have lead to suffering at both communal and individual levels. If we turned this into a pedagogical principle: lectures in the philosophy classroom ought not advertise and work through the professor's own suffering but, rather, lectures should (a) offer insights for encouraging students to identify the parts of their received tradition that cause suffering and (b) provide tools and wisdom for those students to repair the problematic features of their received traditions that have lead to suffering. This means that, although Peirce and Ochs are against Cartesianism in its priority of individual intuitions over the logic and wisdom of Scripture, Ochs is not against Cartesianism in the sense that the task of philosophy involves learning how to identify problems found within received traditions. While Ochs does not develop this point in *PPLS* (1998),[18] he explicitly defends it in 2001!

[A]Ochs's Defense and Explanation of Academic Philosophy (2001)

Three years after the publication of *PPLS*, Ochs published "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today: Under the Sign of Three" in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (edited by Graham Ward). In his chapter, he reflects upon three themes: Cartesianism, tradition, and the turn toward Scripture within philosophy.

[17] Ochs is not the only Peirce scholar to read "The Fixation of Belief" in this way and to connect Peirce's pragmatism with the notion of repairing suffering; for instance, see Annette Ejsing's *Theology of Anticipation*.

[18] I arrived at it, inferentially, only by asserting that Ochs's reading of Peirce's "Fixation of Belief" is not the typical one where "fixation" means settling into one's beliefs and convictions.

Pragmatism does not simply allow one to reaffirm their 'tradition'.[19] Ochs writes that pragmatists, "*with* Descartes…recognize the failings of tradition *but also*…recognize that the modern project of reasoning itself takes flight out of the night of these failings."[20] According to Ochs, pragmatism adds to Descartes's reasoning

> **[EXT]**the *memory* that this reason, [which] flies out of the night, is itself a messenger *only* of night…: our means of seeing in bold relief just what has gone wrong in our religious and social traditions. This flight of reason is in this sense a prophetic complaint. But it is not itself the vehicle of redemption, a source of new light. It is the cry without which Israel in bondage could not be heard, the cry that goes up to God.[21]**[/EXT]**

Descartes's flight from tradition can be understood as "a prophetic complaint" but not the kind of prophecy that in itself leads to or seeks out redemption.

Pragmatism improves upon Cartesianism because of its desire for and openness toward redemption. In Ochs's words:

> **[EXT]**If pragmatism is the logician's way of saying 'know them by their fruit', this means both that prophecy's word is told only in the testing of its public consequences, and that reasoning is a vehicle of prophecy. Stated in Jewish terms, this means that what Descartes calls reason is prophetic, but only a prophecy of warning and condemnation. The fruit of such prophecy is redemption—or the lack of it. The question is, how to find the fruit? The pragmatic answer is: learn to read death, and understand its signs.[22]**[/EXT]**

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[19] Another way to put it is this: "Tradition is complex. Tradition is complicated. Tradition is messy…. [We need] a less conservative, Romantic notion of tradition [and] one that includes the complications, complexities, and messiness of tradition in the concept of tradition itself. The distance one needs from this understanding of tradition is not a distance for the sake of distance but rather…a distance…encouraged by tradition through the practice of reflection. One does not overcome tradition in the practice of reflection, but one becomes more grounded in the[ir] tradition if the tradition is encouraging the kind of reflection that it ought to be encouraging" (Goodson, "What Is Reparative Reasoning?" http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/volume-10-no-2-december-2011-public-debate-and-scriptural-reasoning/what-is-reparative-reasoning/).

[20] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 336.

[21] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 336. I should note that Ochs's writing in this chapter represents some of his best, stylistically. I quote much from the essay because it reads so poetically!

[22] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 337.

The claims of prophetic reasoning must be tested by its "fruit," defined by Ochs in terms of "its public consequences."

Ochs outlines three ways for philosophers to "learn to read death, and understand its signs":

> **[EXT]**(1)Realize that the mark of death is the individual reasoning that declares by its very individuation the death…of some specific, failed practices, failed bits of tradition and of social process. This mark is critical reasoning: the Western academy's defining tool. The method of critical reasoning is to thematize certain objects of inspection, which occupy the place, in the propositional logic of critical reasoning, of 'subjects' about which certain predications are made. Each subject of this kind is a mark of something that has failed….
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> (2) Realize that every death of this kind is finite: the death of *a* creature. The reasoning that declares this death is itself finite: the finite mark of a finite death. Descartes errs only because he over-generalizes the failings of this or that aspect of his inherited tradition of inquiry (scholastic), as if he knew also of the potential failings of all of that tradition (all of scholasticism, or all of medieval Christianity). But there is no reason to doubt that some failing in Descartes's inheritance gave rise to his reasonings. Western academic reasoning is prophetic but finite.
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> (3) Realize that, if this academic-philosophic reasoning is finite, then there must be more to say than what this reasoning has to say. If reasoning tells me what has failed, then more-than-reason alone will tell me what in my tradition, heritage, past, has not failed…. The Israelite prophets reject neither Israel itself, nor its divine law, nor its priesthood. They reject only the error and sin in all these.[23]**[/EXT]**

Before turning to a pragmatic interpretation of Scripture (Exodus 3),[24] Ochs concludes his reflections on what his theological understanding of academic philosophy looks like:

> **[EXT]**Philosophic [and] academic reasoning is comparably prophetic in the West. Whatever it assumes and continues of its cultural heritage is [neither] doubted nor negated…and is, therefore, affirmed by the very fact of its being left alone. Whatever is affirmed in this way discloses the positive traces of the Redeemer in the academic's cultural heritage.[25]**[/EXT]**

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[23] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 337-338.

[24] See Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 344-348.

[25] Ochs, "The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today," 338.

Like Descartes and Cartesianism, philosophers and philosophy professors can share "complaint[s]" against tradition(s). Philosophers and philosophy professors, however, should not remain closed off to the possibility of redemption while teaching different philosophical arguments and theories—which relates to an argument made in the previous section: philosophers and philosophy professors should provide tools and wisdom (found in philosophical arguments and theories) for readers and students to repair the problematic features of their received traditions.[26]

The "prophetic" aspect, which arises from the opportunity to teach and write philosophy, comes about through connecting different philosophical arguments and theories with their possibility for redemption. Their possibility for redemption occurs in the disclosure of "the positive traces of [God] the Redeemer." These traces are located within Scripture—hence Ochs's "return to Scripture" within philosophy.

[A]Conclusion

In terms of how Ochs has shaped my own approach to philosophy in my ten year professorial career, the primary lesson learned the primary lesson learned concerns how the history of philosophy goes from reparative moment to reparative moment—which means (a) no single period of philosophy ought to be glamorized or idealized over any

[26] See William James's *Pragmatism* for the fully developed thesis that philosophical arguments and theories can and ought to be used as instruments or tools.

other,[27] and (b) philosophy does not progress toward some ideal stage of intellectualism but, rather, solves particular problems for and within each and every generation.[28]

In summary, based upon the genealogy constructed in this chapter, Ochs is *for* Cartesianism in the sense that philosophy needs to critique received traditions of practice and thinking. Ochs being *against* Cartesianism involves (1) the nominalist basis of individual intuitions, (2) the priority of rationality and intellectualism over ordinary life, and (3) setting modern philosophy on a course neglecting the logic and wisdom of Scripture. As a student of Ochs, what baffles me the most about the current state of philosophy is how academic philosophers treat the rejection of Scripture as a given—that is, as an obvious part of philosophy that had no beginning justification or warrant. In other words, philosophers no longer argue against the logic and wisdom of Scripture but instead simply assume or assert that Scripture has no place within the study of philosophy as if Scripture never had a place within the study of philosophy. Ochs continually reminds us that thinkers used to treat the logic and wisdom as part of their role *as philosopher*.[29]

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[27] For several years, John Milbank was Ochs's colleague at the University of Virginia. Milbank certainly glamorizes medieval Christian philosophical theology as the period that all philosophy ought to return. Ochs's Rabbinic Pragmatism differs from Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy project exactly on this issue relating to the method of reasoning and the temptation toward recovery.

[28] Following the distinction made in the previous footnote: the nuance involved in Ochs's thinking about these matters is that, on the surface, he seems to glamorize American Pragmatism—especially Charles Sanders Peirce's philosophy—as the period of philosophy that ought to be prioritized above all others. However, Ochs does not present a glamorized or idealized version of Peirce's pragmatism other than describing how Peirce's philosophy turns all of philosophy back to Scripture as a norm for "real generals." In this way, Peirce repairs the limitations found within modern philosophy without dismissing the helpful moments located within the arguments of modern philosophers. In what some might label a paradoxical move, Ochs claims that Peirce's philosophy gets philosophy back on track without calling for an overly simplistic recovery of or return to Peirce's work.

[29] For more on this, see my "Introduction" in *American Philosophers Read Scripture*.

In conclusion, the purpose of academic philosophy involves prophetic complaints against received traditions. In this way, Cartesianism remains a model for academic philosophy. The role of philosophers within academic institutions, however, becomes finding ways to redeem and repair the problems within received traditions. In this way, Cartesianism ought to be judged as lacking or problematic. Rather, the kind of redemption and repair envisioned by Ochs gets modelled by and within Scripture.[30]

[30] For how this works and what this means, see Goodson, *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism*, 35-38 & 129-131.

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